

THE PEOPLE SPEAK TO THE DESIGN COMMUNITY

BY
CAROLINE MILLER
LECTURER DEPT OF RESOURCE AND
ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING
MASSEY UNIVERSITY

Palmerston North adopts a novel method of addressing the controversial infill housing issue.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of size, there is hardly a town or city in New Zealand where the issue of infill does not provoke at least mild community outrage. The press and other media abound with stories of the horrors of infill, of inappropriately designed dwellings intruding into established neighbourhoods and irrevocably altering the look and lifestyle of the existing community. Palmerston North is no exception. Press stories emphasise the negative aspects of infill, while staff in the Planning Service Section has regular discussion with irate neighbours, assuring them that the structure currently being built next door, does comply with the District Plan's provisions. The intention of this article is to look at one means of understanding effective consultation over a controversial issue, in this case, infill.

BACKGROUND

At this point it is helpful to give a quick resumé of the planning provision which provided for the development of infill in Palmerston North.

Since the late 1970s, with the notification of the second review, Palmerston North has had a single residential zone, a quite revolutionary concept for the time. This approach was continued in 1986 when an amendment to that scheme (which became operative in 1981), provided for infill subdivision into fee-simple titles, of sites with a minimum area of 250m², provided the site created could meet a number of criteria, including the ability to establish a "complying" dwelling. Bulk and location controls were generally quite simple with reliance on the standard tools of yards, height in relation to boundary controls, etc. The third review made operative in 1991 continued this approach, largely unaltered. Thus by 1995, Palmerston North and its community had largely accepted the existence of a single residential zone and generally the problems associated with cross-leasing had been avoided.

THE REAL "PROBLEM"

While Palmerston North residents accepted a single residential zone they did not always happily accept the outcomes of that zone's liberal infill policy, which allowed infill developments to occur anywhere in the city. This meant that infill was a potential issue for everyone in the community.

Of particular concern was the use of the infill provisions in one low cost housing area, where undeveloped residential sites were resubdivided to create very small sites for low cost housing. Although this style of development was short-lived, and was not repeated, the area became an icon for the potential for "slum" infill development.

Media and community focus on the issue, combined with observance of the responses elsewhere in New Zealand to the infill issue, meant that when infill was examined in 1994/95 as part of the district plan formulation process, it was viewed with some trepidation. For those in the community who expressed an opinion, infill was identified as the major issue facing the residential areas of the city.

If the community had identified the issue, they also believed they had identified the cause, that is the small size of most infill sites. At the outset, for the community at least, the solution to improving infill, was to raise the minimum site size. If this was done, there was a strong belief that all would be well.

While on the surface this view would appear to be correct, even a preliminary examination of existing infill development revealed a quite different picture. Using the council's quarterly Residential Building Survey and repeating an Infill Survey first undertaken in 1990, which aimed to capture the views of those who lived close to or on an infill site, combined with some basic fieldwork, revealed a quite different and more complex issue.

While the size of the site was an element in the equation, information from the Residential Building Survey indicated a steady

rise in the average size of sites, so that by early 1995 the average infill site was some 400m². The mythical 250m² site was in fact rarely created. While the rise in the average infill site size partly reflected the conversion of several large blocks into residential sites, most infill sites were in the 350 - 400m² size range. Site size was evidently not the only problem.

Observation of infill sites revealed a more fundamental problem. Infill homes were frequently built to maximum site coverage, with minimum yards, and were often two-storied. This visual impact was compounded by frequent use of brick construction, topped off with heavy, steeply pitched roofs. These somewhat unexpected (on the part of the planners and those who lived in the area) homes quickly came to dominate residential neighbourhoods, seriously impacting on existing residents real and perceived enjoyment of their neighbourhood's amenity values.

Overarching this debate was a simultaneous realisation that Palmerston North had been particularly lucky in maintaining a very compact city and that it was vital that this be maintained. Infill made an important contribution to better use of urban land and infrastructures and must be regarded as a small step in the direction of urban sustainability, and more particularly in maintaining the city's compact form.

THE "PROBLEM" AND THE DISTRICT PLAN

Having now defined the parameters of the "problem" and the communities concern, it would have been tempting to respond with a tough new set of rules, before that solution was forced upon us, by a vociferous community, of the type that made such significant submissions to several Auckland district plans. An additional consideration was that although there was strong commitment from the city council to public consultation as part of the District Plan formulation process, there was an equally strong commitment to producing a plan as quickly as possible. These two factors helped to shape the way the "problem" would be dealt with in terms of consultation.

From the research described briefly above, it was clear that "the problem" revolved around design and amenity values and the challenge was to develop an approach which addressed both aspects of the infill "problem".

In short, infill had to be made acceptable to the community and meet the very explicit standards of amenity which the community appeared to want in their neighbourhoods. If that could be achieved, infill would be able to continue to make its modest contribution to urban sustainability.

From all these concerns came the idea for the residential design workshop; at which a concerted attempt would be made to address the "problem" and generate some acceptable solutions.

THE RESIDENTIAL DESIGN WORKSHOP

The concept of the workshop was quite simple. A cross-section of people were invited to come to a workshop which commenced in the early evening. Participants were divided into groups which were facilitated by a local architect or architectural designer who was experienced in using the existing plan provisions and who was involved in residential design work. The assistance gained from these architects and architectural designers was invaluable, because it provided a users perspective and ensured that the practical issues of design were not lost. It was a compliment to their skills that all those facilitators discharged their roles so well.

The groups were drawn from a wide cross-section of people, including the already formed consultation focus groups, councillors, council officers involved in building, and a variety of other people including building company representatives and those who had been critical of infill development. This produced a group of almost 610 people who were divided into six groups. Care was taken to ensure no group was dominated by one particular viewpoint.

After a meal, which was important in allowing people to socialise and feel at ease with each other, the participants were briefed on the task. Each group was given a site, not all infill sites, in the city to work with. Details of the sites location, size, etc, had been circulated to participants about 10 days prior to the evening. On the evening, each group was provided with two, large scale plans and photographs of the site and surrounding area. Generally, group participants had taken the time to view the site before the workshop.

Participants were told at the briefing that they were to use their assigned sites to look at designing dwellings which provided:

- Good on-site amenity for those living on the site.
- A good relationship with the sites adjacent to it.
- A positive contribution to the amenities of the neighbourhood.

In looking at their design, they were also told to assume there were no rules to constrain how or what they did. This was intended to encourage lateral thinking and to avoid groups being constrained by the existing rules.

Finally, the groups were told that they had one-and-a-half hours to deliberate and then they would have to report back to the whole group with answers to the following questions:

- What problems and issues did you identify?
- What rules and design restrictions have you used?
- How would your group control development in the residential area?

While the groups worked and often indulged in vigorous and noisy discussions, myself and the principal planner, Greg Vossler, circulated to ensure groups didn't get stalled or become bogged down on a particular issue.

The discussion and debate, when the groups returned to the final session was excellent and the general response from participants was that it was a useful and thought-provoking exercise.

THE OUTCOMES

In terms of the residential section of the District Plan, the workshop was invaluable. In a relatively short period we got a useful response from a cross-section of people, both as individuals and through their interaction with others. It was a very quick and efficient method to get a great deal of useful feedback and ideas. It also created a group of interested individuals, who, as the plan's provisions were developed, were willing to provide on-going assessment and criticism of proposals.

The open nature of the design workshop appeared to give the design community in particular, a confidence that their views were being sought and would be considered, even if ultimately another approach was adopted. For those in the community who had criticised infill and the general standard of residential development, it was an opportunity to observe the complexity and potential difficulties of developing policies and rules, to achieve a multiplicity of outcomes.

For myself, as author of the residential section of the District Plan, it provided an invaluable focusing of what the real issues were and how they might be addressed. In one evening, the major

alternative approaches had been considered and at least partly assessed. Equally because the exercise was based on a *de novo* situation, the solutions/approaches tended to be developed/advocated on a clear effects-based approach. The effects that were of concern were clearly identified and solutions were developed from that basis.

Most importantly, the workshop provided the basis for the development of a set of what came to be called, performance policies, which must be achieved when any dwelling is designed and located on a site. These policies provided a clear and unequivocal statement of the effects being addressed and the outcomes achieved, by the performance standards which followed. They also provided a clear guide for those who wished to work outside the performance standards.

The provision of a two-tiered approach – compliance with the performance standards or assessment of a totally original design in terms of the performance policies – was a direct result of a suggestion by the design community.

CONCLUSION

This brief discussion highlights some of the real benefits which resulted for the residential design workshop. The workshop provided an opportunity for a cross-section of people to have an effective and influential voice. It also allowed a useful relationship to be developed with the design community who must work with the resultant controls, on a daily basis. While the final outcomes did not always totally reflect individuals particular concerns, the open process did appear to engender a willingness to try to work with the approach adopted in the plan.

Clearly, we may not have found a solution to the infill "problem" but the outcomes generated by the workshop do appear to have gone some way to addressing them. While the submission phase has closed recently, it was interesting to note that infill and residential controls were not identified as one of the major areas addressed by submissions. This is certainly not an outcome I would have predicted in 1994.

Caroline Miller was formerly a senior planner and co-ordinator of the District Plan with the Palmerston North City Council. She is now a lecturer in the Department of Resource and Environmental Planning, Massey University. ■